

## Nature, Labor and Man in Robert Frost's Nature Poems

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### Abstract

The present study dealt with the interactions of nature, man and labor in four poems of Robert Frost, "Mending Wall", "After Apple Picking", "Out Out" and "The Aim was Song". The results based on previous studies and close considerations of the four poems indicated that nature's reactions to man are mainly in harmony with man's attitudes to his labor. When man is detached from his work in the rural setting, nature is either indifferent or acts antagonistically. While, when man is integrated with his labor, nature becomes sympathetic and subservient to man. Man's attachment to his work results in improvement of nature and his detachment from his labor can cause spiritual death, exhaustion and even literal death as happens in "Out Out". Nature in the four poems does not act only as a setting rather it acts in accordance with man. The four poems in the study are at times compared and contrasted. Sporadically, other nature poems of Frost are also cited in the study in relevance with the four poems.

**Keywords:** Rural Nature, Poetry, Work, Man, Robert Frost

### Introduction

Most of the time, the words nature and poetry when juxtaposed together remind us of romantic poets especially the Lake Poets such as Wordsworth. In other words, nature is associated with romantic poetry and nature poets are expected to be romantic one way or another. Therefore, a poet who has brooded on rural landscapes and most of his works especially before 1902 were related to outdoor village life should be conscious of the appellation of nature poet and his attempts to purge himself of the label are not as significant as the content and imagery of his poems which deal with nature. Robert Francis (1947) asserts that when in 1945, some people called Frost a nature poet, he declared, "I'm no nature poet". The reason

might be sought in his tendency to have reconciliation with himself for the inclusion of people in his poems. However, if his so- called nature poems are believed to have a unique and prominent place in his poetry (Ghasemi and Mansooji, 2006) and his nature poems are the most memorized, loved ,anthologized and criticized among his works, the public interest in them should not be surprising . Robert Frost as asserted by Ghasemi and Mansooji disappoints the modern reader who expects to see the treatment of nature typical of Wordsworth or Coleridge in his nature poems. For Frost nature does not act as God to be worshiped to offer inspiration to the poet. However as Klein (2008) asserts although romanticism is diminished in Frost at least he shares with the romantic poets a keen observation of the natural world as the source and context of maintaining life, a scene where life is enacted. Frost has a unique treatment of nature which caters more to realism rather than to romanticism. One striking point here is the fact that there are differences in pictures and presentations of nature offered by Frost and other nature poets . As asserted by Rao (2019), Frost offers a photographic realism of the rural life of New England. Therefore, the ways of nature are not adhered or praised in Frost's nature poetry and nature is portrayed in a realistic way in its relations and interactions with man.

Nature for Frost has no meaning without man as he himself states there are only a few poems which are truly nature poems and they all were written before 1902. Frost moved to England with his family in 1912 and settled there. Frost examined and critically revised all the poems he had produced by that time. He concluded that the majority of those poems belonged to before 1902 when he himself believed that he was a nature poet. He even destroyed a number of those poems and kept about thirty of them and brought the remaining poems under the title of *A Boy's Will* (Thomson, 1967). In almost all his nature poems, at least one man is present, presumably the poet himself. This fact and the realistic air of his nature poems imply that for him man is more important than nature in its pure form. In fact, nature acts as a playground where human beings interact. This goes back to his love for people whom he states that he loves. Thomson believes that Frost could neither expel people from his life nor from his poetry and even in his purely nature poems men exist.

His main concern is humanity and the interactions of the people on a field which is nature and the rural landscape which he most of the time portrays realistically. In “ Mending Wall” the two characters are discussing the mending of a wall bordering their lands. It seems that Frost has respect for nature but his main concern is with the entity which fills nature and that is man. The lyrical excitement in

his poetry is produced by the human feelings and not the landscape. Gould (1968) states that for Frost nature turns into a backdrop for the emotions and actions of his characters, However, it should not be assumed that he is an objective presenter of the people, he expresses his own opinion and he is subjective in his evaluation of the people (Thomson, 1967). Thomson(1967) contends that Frost has no ultimate answer to the problems of man but the momentary responses which he offers emanate from his total experience with living. The purpose of the present study is to probe into one of his momentary answers which is labor by considering a few of his poems whose setting is nature. This study intends to reveal instances of presenting labor and work as a response to the situations and conditions of life and how man's meaning and significance in life is determined by his labor. Since nature is the setting of the poems considered in this study and labor is man's attempt in his confrontation with life in a rural setting the study intends to deal with the interactions of man, labor and nature. In other words, this study intends to probe into the interactional effects of man's labor on nature and on his life in the following nature poems.

## Mending Wall

One of the poems which explicitly involves human labor in a natural setting is Frost's "Mending Wall". Published in 1914, it is the first poem in the second book of Frost, *North of Boston*. It describes the rebuilding of a wall between the land of the speaker and that of his neighbor which needs to be rebuilt every spring. The poem describes the speaker's attitude towards repeating the ritual of mending the wall and raises important questions regarding human labor concerning both nature and men. The speaker has to repeat the futile repairing of a wall which practically seems to serve no purpose because the neighbor has pine trees which cannot be damaged and the speaker's apple trees are safe because there are no cows around. The neighbor taking part in the ritual and suffering the toil like the speaker, still repeats that that good fences make good neighbors, a statement which the poem seems to debate but neither refutes nor approves. Nature itself, should be taken accountable by destroying human artifacts every winter and by forcing man to repeat the same futile activity in the same way that gods in the myth of Sisyphus have cursed him to work uselessly and when his feat is done topple it down the hill to begin the work anew. However, although nature is finally the winner and is ultimately much more powerful than man, man can display his integrity and identity through labor. Andermatt (2005) asserts that Robert Frost emphasizes appreciating man's manual labor for its own sake and he is not concerned with its economic or practical rewards.

Believing that mending the wall is both repetitive and useless, the speaker suggests that abandoning it brings no harm though ironically it is the speaker who brings the neighbor to start the task every year. However, the neighbor insists that they keep on mending the wall each spring implying that the work itself is valuable and labor not its consequence is the goal. Perhaps it is not the fence which makes “good neighbors,” rather the very act or endeavor of reconstructing it and the human cooperation for a common goal is what matters the most. For the speaker, the value of labor is judged by its tangible result or its material benefit. Whereas, for the neighbor, labor is an end and the act of working is necessary for maintaining good relationship and founding a livable society in which boundaries are also an important ingredient. It should also be noted that Frost pictures the neighbor quite determined and powerful in the execution of the task (Alçar, 2009). In the eyes of the speaker the neighbor is portrayed as an ‘old-stone savage armed’. The neighbor not only believes in hard work and labor but also does the work.

Rao (2019) believes that Frost’s attention to labor and physical work in this poem might be explained by his belief in the American idealism regarding the importance of hard work and duty. At the same time, working on nature and mending or improving it is one of the necessities which nature creates to make us confront it. Nature damages the wall and people get together to mend it. Frost prepares this situation in his poems so that in this confrontation between man and nature man would come to a realization of himself and gain vision and self-knowledge (Ghasemi and Mansooji, 2006). Moreover, it is nature which provides human cooperation through the labor which it imposes on men. Although the speaker questions the necessity of the wall, and implies its absurdity and uselessness he himself initiates its mending each spring. The labor of the mending of the wall brings the two men to each other and although they are separate in opinion even on the labor itself, working together produces a common bond which they both share. Lynen (1960) calls this the concept of fraternity or brotherhood through labor. Lynen also argues that nature attempts to destroy the wall every winter because it hates boundaries and barriers and it intends to reclaim what belongs to her. According to Lynen in this respect, the speaker who hates the wall has sympathy with nature because there is an elemental spirit in nature which opposes all man-made boundaries.

Human labor in this poem leads both to man’s internal satisfaction and to the improvement or beautification of nature because this activity brings no harm to nature. However, Frost does not suggest that man is permitted to conduct any activity in nature for the sake of his own internal satisfaction. For instance, in “The Wood Pile”, Frost seems to complain about man’s compulsion to exploit nature and harm it. In this poem, the speaker who is the poet is wondering why the wood pile is left in snow to decay

when it could have served a purpose such as bringing heat to a home. In this poem, the woodcutter's ax, metonymy for his labor instead of making smoke for heat is causing "the slow smokeless burning of decay". James, Islam, and Zyphur (2006) contend that in this poem, Frost is turning his attention from the act of working to its consequence for nature and displays the condition of nature after human activity which has abused nature.

Nature's opposition to boundaries and barriers brings it in constant conflict and opposition to man in a number of Frost's poems such as "Out Out" and "After Apple Picking". Nevertheless, Andermatt (2005) sees in this conflict a therapeutic effect which is achieved through man's labor and struggle with nature. In this struggle and conflict with nature, Andermatt continues in Frost's poetry mostly the young or middle-aged working class men are involved. Frost is conscious in his poems that if his characters learn to appreciate hard work and their own manual labor, they can achieve a sense of belonging and pride, a sort of integrity of character which can be obtained from mending a "wall".

### **Out Out and After Apple Picking**

These two poems are considered together because of their treatment of the theme of labor in a rural landscape and the literal death in the former and the figurative one in the latter which happen in both of them as a result of not appreciating hard work in the sense which Frost demands. Frost demands that his characters value labor for what it is and not for the material interest. Of course, he is conscious of the reasons for this lack of appreciation. In "Out Out" Frost sees the boy a victim of the economic inequality but at the same time shows the inevitable condition and the tragic end of the boy who is not fit for the work he is forced to perform. In "After apple Picking", sleep which normally should fold the speaker after a day of hard work only enhances his or her exhaustion because the speaker is not satisfied spiritually with the work he or she has done during the day. The dissatisfaction should be sought in the speaker's inability to appreciate the labor. The speaker is all the time weighing and considering the labor but because the work has not emanated from his or her inner derives the speaker is not able to come to a reasonable conclusion about the performance. In fact, the speaker is emotionally detached from the labor (Andermatt, 2005).

"Out, Out" reveals that being emotionally detached from one's work leads to no satisfactory result. Frost intentionally depicts a young boy to make his point and act as the main character in the poem. Set in a rural setting at the first decades of the twentieth century, the poem elaborates on manual labor of

the young boy and his role in the family. The work of the young boys was very significant in the economic conditions of the rural families, and Frost's poem implies that this is an important problem. Children worked and contributed economically to their families, but it seemed that it was their only purpose. In “Out Out”, the boy has no emotional attachment to his work and has no pleasure in it. He seems to be pleased to be saved from his hard work and is happy if they announced that the work of the day was over

Call it a day, I wish they might have said

To please the boy by giving him the half hour

That a boy counts so much when saved from work (10- 12).

The above lines indicate that the work of day for the boy was not pleasurable and the half hour was what the boy “counts so much” if they spare him. The boy does not have any appreciation for his labor and his interaction with his work is not enjoyable for him. The young boy’s only motive seems to be ending the work which consists of cutting sticks during the day which is boring for him. “Saved from work” is very suggestive of the boy’s attitude towards his labor because it reveals the boy’s uncomfortable condition and hostile relations with his work (Andermatt, 2005). At the same time, the word “saved” is significant because it suggests that the work is harmful for the boy a fact which unfolds as the poem proceeds. The boy has commitment to the time period because he is responsible for his family whose economic condition and lack of knowledge have forced him to do a man’s job for which the boy has no appreciation. In this scenario, the buzz saw which acts as an antagonist to the boy must be considered as a part of the rural and natural setting of the country life and also its economic situation. Frost personifies the buzz saw which understands what supper means and “snarls and rattles” like a monster. In fact, Frost intends to reveal that the saw has the upper hand and controls the boy instead of being subservient to him. In other words, the labor is greater than the laborer. The saw here acts as a symbol of working hard for economic gain which severs his hand and finally kills the boy. Frost shows that this is the inevitable end of being controlled by labor and it is what happens when man has no understanding or emotional attachment to his work.

In the incompatible relationship between the saw that is the labor and the boy the saw not only has the power to incapacitate the boy by cutting his hand and kill him but also is powerful enough to terminate the economic stability of the family if it wishes to do so. According to Andermatt the saw has the

power of enlightening the boy of the dangers of doing a man's work but unfortunately it does this act when it is too late. The boy understands that by losing his hand every thing is spoiled and he is no longer a farm hand and useful for his family. Lynen (1960 ) asserts that for the boy the rural reputation is lost.

Then the boy saw all-

Since he was old enough to know, big boy

Doing a man's work, though a child at heart-He

saw all spoiled . . . (22-25).

Frost's reference to the tranquil Vermont background and the tall mountain peaks in the landscape which witness the incident is an attempt to show the world of the young boy in which he has no importance or reputation without his physical ability. In this poem, Frost shows the drab nature totally detached from man and his life or death. This indifference is portrayed in the act of the workers who are around the dying boy and get to their work because economic labor must go on with the boy or without him. By nature, I mean the rural nature of the village life which has made men so indifferent to the death of one of the members of their community. In the last four lines of the poem, Frost gives a dreary and drab presentation of the rural atmosphere and its inhabitants because they turn "to their affairs" since they are not dead. However, Andermatt( 2005) believes that Frost has empathy for the villagers because they are ruled by the economic pressure which has no understanding of emotionality or mourning for dead people and the boy is doomed to die because he has no understanding of his work and no appreciation of it. Perhaps, the buzz saw has saved the boy from his miserable life and the natural environment of the Vermont and the landscape and its inhabitants should only witness. In my opinion, in this poem Frost shows the real picture of the rural nature which is harsh and hard and devoid of the facile sentimentality which wealthy urban people tend to attach to it. Moreover, he has shown the result of a labor which is only motivated by economic gain.

In "After Apple Picking" , we witness a dark image of man's relationship with labor and nature. The poem reveals the spiritual emptiness and emotional death of a person who is totally motivated by material gain. Although spiritual death probably occurs in the poem signified by confusion, sleeplessness ,



tiredness and over consciousness with no result, the juxtaposition of the images of sleep and winter in the poem can make the interpretation of literal death also possible. Moreover, in the concluding lines of the poem, winter and sleep are paired together which according to Armandett (2005) may be taken as referring to death by the readers although Frost himself has stated that the poem is not about death. Dağoğlu (2012) sees the poem primarily about the death of a farmer who is obsessed with his little accomplishment and believes that the poem is revealing even literal death relying on symbolic interpretation of the rich imagery of the poem. The readers who see the poem a death poem rely on the words “heaven” “long sleep”, etc. At least we know that we do not witness death as conspicuously as “Out Out” in this poem. Cook (1958), however, does not believe that the poem is centered on death rather he sees the poem dealing with the theme of accomplishment pointing to the speaker’s reference to the apples picked by him or her during the day. As the speaker mentions that only two or three apples are left unpicked in lines 4 and 5 of the poem, we can assume that the speaker has done the job successfully. However Armandett (2005), draws our attention to the barrel beside the speaker’s ladder which is not full signifying that the task is not complete. This indicates that something is incomplete or left undone. The speaker’s preoccupation with the apples unpicked and with the barrel which has not become full shows that the speaker is only weighing the material gain of the labor, a problem which led to the literal death of the young boy in “out out” seems to persist here. Working too much to glean the material rewards of the labor brings boredom and lack of interest in the job. Perhaps, the speaker’s simultaneous attention to both the unpicked apples and the barrel reveals a kind of confusion and greed. At the same time, the speaker laments the loss of the apples which have fallen from his hand and although ripe and healthy have to go to “the cider-apple heap” and according to the speaker are worthless. Therefore, what seems to be at stake is the material gain.

The concluding lines of the poem make a comparison between human sleep and the sleep of nature. In other words, a comparison between man and nature and the speaker appeals to the woodchuck to make the point clear whether nature knows what troubles the speaker with his or her sleep. Dağoğlu (2012) sees the words “trouble” and “sleep” as two essential words which are quite illuminating in understanding the essential meaning of the poem. We add the concept of labor to these aforementioned words to find an answer to the speaker’s trouble with sleep. The speaker is pondering on the nature’s sleep in winter which is close because the apple-picking season is late Autumn. Nature deserves to have trouble-free sleep leading to her rejuvenation in spring but the speaker is doomed to have a troublesome sleep. In my opinion, the



reason must be sought in the speaker's detachment from labor because labor for the speaker seems to be motivated by the material gain and not by spiritual attachment. Whereas, nature which is integrated and attached to its labor starts a cycle during its sleep. The speaker is troubled with his or her sleep and is not able to resolve the problem. The end of the day doesn't bring peacefulness and sound sleep for the speaker.

## **The Aim Was Song**

This nature poem is sympathetic to the labor of man with regard to the performance of nature. Here, man seems to have the upper hand because he improves nature. Taking song as synonymous with art in general and poetry in particular reveals that for Frost art is an improvement of nature and not an infatuation with nature or an imitation of it which the romantics propose. For a long time, the wind has been blowing with no discrimination and no artistic result but man teaches the wind how it should blow. Islam and Zyphur (2006) contend that through his work, man carries on a progression of nature. At the same time, man's importance lies in his ability to have proper interaction with nature, which is teaching nature how to act (Goody, 1977). Nature is the provider of the raw material which is wind. Man is responsible for shaping it and turning it into something which nature is not able to produce which is song. Frost tells that the main purpose or the aim was song something which nature had proved that it was not capable of making because "it blew too hard". Man makes the song gradually and step by step he learns himself and teaches nature. Therefore, in his procedural actions man follows a natural order but the key is "measure".

Why is man successful in his labor in "The Aim was Song"? The answer is the integration of man with his labor, his spiritual attachment to what he is doing because in this poem, he is not working for any material interest. Making the song is an artistic accomplishment which certainly is not a mechanical labor emanated from obligations to family members like "Out Out" nor is originated from purely material benefit like "After Apple Picking". Rather, it is rooted in man's soul and it is successful. It must be noted that in this poem the aim of man and nature intermingle because man tells nature what is wrong and nature accepts and corrects itself because the persona in the poem tells that for nature also the aim was song but it did not know how to make it:

In the present study, we probed into the concepts of nature, man and labor in four nature poems of Robert frost. In each poem nature acts towards man based on man's stance towards his labor. Man's standing towards his labor also determines the labor's output and what man obtains from his labor is mostly related to his own relations with his work. Perhaps, labor is more decisive than nature on the conditions of man and his performance. Nature instigates labor in "Mending wall", it sets the field for the game between man and his labor. It is nature which necessitates man's action in the first place because nature ruins the wall every winter and the two neighbors mend it. In the process of mending the wall, the attitudes of the two neighbors towards mending the wall are presented. Through their relations with labor on which Frost is not completely clear and is rather ambiguous, the reader may infer that the speaker is not attached to his work although he initiated it. Whereas, his neighbor seems to have greater attachment to the labor and maintains that good walls make good neighbors.

In “Out Out”, the rural nature and the conditions of life including the relationship between the boy and his labor leads to his tragic death. This poem shows what happens when man is totally detached from his work and when out of the obligations to community and family a boy is forced to do a man’s job. Nature and rural people only witness the tragic end of the boy and finally turn to their own affairs. When the boy has no appreciation of his labor and is spiritually detached from it, when he wishes to be saved from his labor by being given half an hour, labor somehow saves him from any kind of labor through its agent which is the buzz saw. In “After Apple Picking”, the speaker is motivated not by his labor but by material gain and he is also spiritually detached from his work. In this poem although literal death in the sense which occurred in “Out Out” does not happen, the speaker is spiritually dead because of his or her detachment from the labor.

In “The Aim was Song”, man has complete attachment to what he is doing because he is engaged in an artistic accomplishment. In this poem nature is improved by the labor of man and the cooperation of man and nature leads to the production of art. While man can develop a negative relationship with nature, in this poem, he has created an amicable partnership with both his labor and nature. In this poem, nature is in harmony with man because man is in harmony with his work. Finally, in my opinion, as these four poems show nature’s relations to man are determined by man’s relations with his work when there is spiritual attachment between man and his labor nature becomes cooperative. When there is no attachment between man and his labor, nature acts antagonistically and might even lead to the literal death of man; if not, at least to his spiritual death.

The present study suffers from a number of limitations. First of all, this study only considered four poems and its results can not be generalized to all nature poems of Robert Frost. Second, the four poems studied in the study were chosen both on the basis of their popularity and the researcher’s own interest in them. Therefore, it is suggested that the same topic be replicated with the other nature poems of the poet.

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